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Advanced Patient Communication Skills Part 2: Salvaging a Damaged Patient Relationship and Identifying the Red Flag Patient

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While it can take months to bring a patient into your practice, it takes only seconds to lose them. And while you may shake your head at the loss or be left feeling confused about where it went wrong – more often than not the indicators were there. Here is a guide for identifying a flawed patient relationship – and possible solutions for a positive outcome.

Common reasons a patient disappears:

- Poor customer service. Never forget your patients are electing to pay a significant amount of money out-of-pocket for your services. They need – and deserve – to feel appreciated for choosing your practice. Every patient walking through your door should be treated with the 5-star experience they expect.

This includes, but is certainly not limited to, returning their calls as soon as possible, providing them with a smile from the time they first call your office to the time they leave, offering them a beverage and walking them out of the office after their appointment. It is your obligation to make sure they are feeling treated with respect throughout the entire the process.

- Out of sight, out of mind. Once a patient walks out your door, it is easy for them to get caught up in their lives and forget you. Marketing is key to keeping you top of mind. Email marketing and social media communications play just as big of a role in keeping your practice on an existing patient's radar as it does for bringing new patients into your practice.
- Budgetary concerns. Regardless of the patient's desire to proceed with treatment, there can be underlying stress related to affordability. This is why providing patient financing information is key, whether you think they need it or not.

- They find someone they like better. It is up to the entire practice to make sure this does not happen!

Issues to avoid:

- Timing is everything. Everyone's time is precious, including your patients. Don't be late. While a few minutes is acceptable, longer delays on a consistent basis indicate you need to evaluate your scheduling processes to determine if you are leaving enough time for consults and procedures.
- Side effects. Make sure you explain all possible side effects to your patients during the initial consult, and make sure you have their undivided attention. Print out a one-sheet for them to take home and review. Then, have them sign it and add it into their chart.
- Missed expectations. Whether the patient feels their skin doesn't look like their favorite celebrity's, or they don't notice a difference from their neurotoxin or surgical results, there are steps you can take to decrease the instances of disappointment with outcomes.

Thoroughly review their expectations ahead of time to make sure you are both in agreement regarding their aesthetic goals, and what the proposed procedures will achieve. After treatment, compare the before and after photos together, sitting with them side-by-side, without a desk between you (this goes for any upset patient!). Discuss expectations vs. reality, and be honest with yourself as well; if the results truly aren't where they need to be, offer another option inside your practice. If a refund is your last and only option, make sure you have them sign a release.

- Price discrepancies. If your patient says they were quoted a different price than they are being charged, be honest and



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explore why. First, is this the case, or was there a miscommunication? Is the quote past the expiration date you had printed on the paper, are they not remembering the price, or did the surgery center raise their rates (We recently had a client who needed to explore an alternate surgery center when this continued to happen. As a practice, you have choices!)? Did you collectively decide, with the patient, to add liposuction to a tummy tuck case, thus raising the overall rate? Answer all questions the patient has and review the quote item by item

Remember that setting realistic expectations ahead of time is key. When you are resolving an issue with a patient, be sure to listen without being offensive or defensive. Listen as they tell their story, make sure they feel heard, answer their questions and let them know you are committed to correcting the situation and delivering on their expectations.

Finally, there are certain individuals that should not be taken on as patients in the first place. These are what we call the “Red Flag” patient.

Signs of a Red Flag patient:

- They show signs of body dysmorphia during their initial consults, pointing out flaws that are not obvious to the naked eye.
- They continue to leave poor online patient reviews for other practices or are already in a current lawsuit against another physician.
- They insist that no procedure you suggest will work for them. If they are scared of needles, lasers and surgery, but want a skincare product to achieve the same results as a facelift, this is not a patient you can please.
- They are constantly in a hurry and not listening to your precautions. This patient isn't going to follow your post-procedure instructions and will end up angry.
- They arrive at their appointment under the influence.

And finally, it is important to remember that not every consult has to turn into a patient. It is okay to let a patient know that you don't believe you will be able to provide them with the results they are looking for.

